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AUTHOR Sandle, Floyd L.
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ABSTRACT

Black theatre has come a long way from the major stereotypes of black people established by white playwrights, but it is still trying to convey the fact that blacks remain in a kind of prison. The slow pace of black theatre in becoming art is obviously due to the long degradation of blacks, the tolerated injustice of whites, and the belated granting of dignity to black family life. From the paternalistic attitude toward blacks in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," revealing the evil of an unjust social system, through plays by Langston Hughes, Louis Peterson, and others, to the fresh, angry viewpoint of "A Raisin in the Sun," black theatre finally progressed to portray family unity and the importance of self-respect. In two recent films, "Lady Sings the Blues" and "Sounder," the ugly image of the maligned, distorted, sexless black woman was overcome. However, colleges and universities bear a great responsibility for training and educating black theatre workers in all roles with a goal of a human dignity of universal quality. (JM)

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BLACK THEATRE: IDEAS THAT MATTER IN THE PURSUIT OF HUMAN DIGNITY

by

Floyd L. Sandle

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BLACK THEATRE: IDEAS THAT MATTER
IN THE PURSUIT OF HUMAN DIGNITY

By Floyd L. Sandle*

Almost nothing that I will say today originates with me. Instead, I will take ideas and concepts that have been propounded before--some put aside until a time like today--twist these into a kind of Sandle-ized fashion, and make them say what I want them to say.

In an effort to forewarn you about my style of presentation, let me remind you of the television commercial about a certain brand of coffee. You will remember the punch line in the commercial is: "Boy do we Americans love coffee?" "There is one thing about coffee, sometimes it is bitter."

My opening idea is in agreement with something said by John Stuart Mills some years ago. He said: "If there is a first principle in intellectual education it is this--that the discipline which does good to the mind is that in which the mind is active, not that in which the mind is passive." Also, he said: "The secret for developing the faculties is to give them much to do, and much inducement to do it."

It is hardly big news that black theatre has been slow in developing. American drama itself did not have an earth-shaking development. But in line with the quote from Mills, black theatre's slow rise, like most facets of black life, has been this--black minds have been cramped into designated recepticles of disuse, forced into inactivity; and made passive because of doubts of their credibility. And black actors and black playwrights have functioned poorly because they could not accept the small place society had pigeon-holed for them. The secret of developing black minds, black actors and black playwrights is to give them much to do, and much inducement to do it. That dimension denied to any one or any race for that matter, cuts off cultural development; and surely it denies human dignity.

Now, in spite of that somber beginning, I hasten to tell you that today black theatre is deep into the reality of American blackness. At the moment I am beyond the black faced minstrel, or the five major stereotypes established by white playwrights. You know them. But I mention them in the hope that

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*Mr. Floyd Sandle (A.B. Dillard University, 1937; M.A. University of Chicago, 1947; Ph.D. Louisiana State University, 1959) is Dean of General Studies at Grambling College. His distinguished record includes the publication of two books and several articles on teaching and Negro drama. He served as a visiting professor to the L.S.U. Speech faculty during the 1972-73 academic year.

we are rid of them!! I mean the buffoon (a comically ignorant type), the tragic mulatto (the product of miscegenation, who is destined to tragic exclusion from white society), the Christian slave (a docile individual who worships both his mortal master and his immortal master), the carefree primitive (an exotic, amoral savage), and the black beast (a villain who seeks equality with whites).

I am surely beyond the good old days when blacks were stuck in plays merely as tragic relief. My idea of black theatre that is deep into the reality of American blackness is theatre as an art.

I acknowledge that over the span of years from 1929-1973, black theatre has had an uphill climb--much because of the reason mentioned earlier. But there is evidence that it has advanced appreciably beyond the point where its viewers--especially whites--are so involved with black stereotypes as representatives of the true life style of blacks to see them as artists.

In a way, the blind acceptance of this mostly false image of black actors, even by some black people, equalled what I choose to call tolerated injustice. For here I am in agreement with Bertrand Russell when he said: "All tolerated injustice has two bad sides: one as regards the fortunate, and the other as regards the unfortunate."

It is my idea that the slow pace of black theatre needs no defense. Really, now. What kind of cultural motivation could blacks get from their beginnings in America as slaves, toiling in the fields from dawn to dusk or as house servants taught to despise the field hands? Name a race that could survive that kind of servitude and emerge in a hundred or so years, schooled in the appreciation of art, music and the theatre.

I am naming one now! The black race; as I talk about black theatre. But emphasizing the idea: that some semblance of human dignity had to come first! Obviously, the tolerated injustice suggests that the slow pace of cultural development and appreciation among blacks was due in no small measure to the slow pace of cultural development and appreciation among whites--in that they were so long in granting the dignity of family life to blacks.

It is even more obvious that the slow rise of blacks has been due to the overt, tolerated injustice, begun in a system of slavery and not to any abstract excellency in justice for its sake.

As an early look at blacks in theatre, think of the paternalistic attitude toward the black characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin. And from that landmark theatre piece, loved by some and hated by many, we learned one crisp lesson: that an unjust social system such as slavery--and any other inequities in our social order--reveal to us that an unjust social system is evil.

Also, the play Mulatto, by Langston Hughes, which dramatized the conflict between a wealthy white land owner and his yard child is just evidence that the unjust social system is evil. This, despite the fact that the play itself is an emotionally engaging drama, marred by melodrama, propaganda, and some

other crudities. However, much of the power of this play first developed from a short story called Father and Son derives from the subject itself. An almost traditional subject in drama, Father-Son conflict, inevitably generates excitement and frequently produces memorable characters and confrontations. Two examples are Laius and Oedipus and Claudius and Hamlet. In this instance, the excitement was intensified for American audiences by the first professional dramatization of a conflict between a Mulatto and his father. Other protest plays followed Mulatto.

However, according to William Brasmer and Dominick Consolo in their text Black Drama "The decade of protest reached its climax in Richard Wright's Native Son, adapted for the stage by Paul Green." They say further that "in the adaptation of the work (the novel) into a drama, Bigger Thomas was humanized and made less fearful. Less brutal. But in the process of this character change from the novel to the drama, Paul Green erased Wright's major thesis: American society has shaped this Bigger and other Bigger Thomases into monsters who are brutal because they are fearful." This brings me to another idea.

Maybe it is coming on a bit too strong to say that Green's Native Son, or Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones, or Marc Connelly's The Green Pastures needed to be the touchstones of the good society as well as Louis Peterson's Take A Giant Step (in 1953). Maybe these plays didn't need in them the useful emotions that are kindly, friendly, and constructive, rather than those that are angry or destructive. But I do say, if such considerations as kindliness, friendliness had been the elements in the plays or the reasons for the plays, these considerations, if followed, would have led the society which saw them much farther than they did. For you may remember that Take A Giant Step, with Spencer Scott as the protagonist, tells the story of educated northern Negroes who are neither primitive nor pathetic, but who have problems.

Briefly, when Scott, a member of the only Negro family in a neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reaches the age of sexual maturity, he becomes isolated from his former white friends, who no longer invite him to their homes or visit him in his. Interestingly, the playwright did not pretend to have a solution. At the end of the play, Spencer Scott remains isolated.

Appropriately enough, I now turn to Lorraine Hansberry's, A Raisin in the Sun. It is perhaps not inappropriate to say I turn with pride to this play. For as has been said by some, "This play achieved the kind of success which earlier Black American playwrights had dreamed of." Also, it won the Drama Critics' Circle Award as the best play of 1958-59. Moreover, it continued for 530 performances in its initial run on Broadway. And while the play is obviously about the dreams of ghetto dwellers, Miss Hansberry succeeds in drawing the family members as individuals in their characters and in their attitudes toward life. And yet the Younger family find unity in their common belief in the importance of self-respect, an element uncharacteristic of other plays by and about Blacks.

It is my feeling that A Raisin in the Sun brought forth a fresh, angry, powerful viewpoint, and this--a needed objectivity to Black theatre.

And at the risk of contradicting myself here today, I say there is some difference between Black theatre and White theatre. For one thing, I feel that White theatre focuses on the box office. But while Black theatre may want to focus on the box office, it finds itself pleasing the audience, even when it is not really trying to please the audience. Further, it is said by some critics that "Miss Hansberry created what Broadway audiences insist they miss in some plays written for whites--the Well Made Play." You know--the plays with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and characters who want something and fight for it and either win or lose--but somehow change in the attempt. This play made a difference, I feel, in terms of audience response, both black and white, but primarily black. For it demanded and received a black audience reaction so strong it was almost a tangible presence.

If my emphasis was on the cinema I could take some pride in Lady Sings the Blues and Sounder, both recent films. For each of these films overcame the ugly stereotypes. Each overcame to an acceptable degree the image of maligned, distorted, and sexless black women. Also, in Lady Sings the Blues we saw, among other things, a black man with enough strength to help his woman. And in Sounder, it was said that Rebecca (Cicely Tyson) was every black woman from slavery to the present. She was every black woman that society has forced or indeed sometimes forces still into the role of protector when it takes away, or threatens to take away, her husband. This character was what Cicely Tyson called "the glue that held the family together: the glue and the guts." As one writer said: "Hers was the love that made her husband the head of the house, and gave him the courage to stand just a little taller."

But let's get back to the theatre. Other plays which I believe worthy, and void of the maligned, distorted, sexless, and otherwise stereotyped blacks are Purlie Victorious and Ceremonies in Dark Old Men. The former play is by Ossie Davis and the latter is by Lonnie Elder. Also, the most recent opus, The River Niger is now playing on Broadway. It stars Lonnie Elder. Already the headlines call this the well-made play. But most of all its characters come off as rich, full-blown; as heroes or villains. There is also in each play mentioned above the undeniable sense of black frustration in a predominantly white world.

For the record, there is some merit in plays by Leroi Jones (Dutchman and The Slave), Douglas Turner Ward (Day of Absence and Happy Ending), Peter DeAnada (Ladies in Waiting), Adrienne Kennedy (Funny House of a Negro), Phillip Hayes Dean (Sty of the Blind Pig), Ted Shine (Contributions), Alice Childress (Wedding Band), and Ed Bullins (The Corner). However, I am not so idealistic or naive as to suggest all plays by black playwrights and about black people are exemplary. Many of these plays come off quite poorly. Much of the Black theatre is on the stump: preaching about ills in the society. Presumably, it is trying to make the world a better place for blacks to live. But all too often the playwrights and the actors do not have audiences--not the right audiences. Some put down too hard and too abruptly the very audience they are trying to capture. One important audience is the large white university community, as well as that of the black community.

Thus, in an attempt to bring Black theatre in line with theatre as a whole, I want to briefly assess the university's responsibility in helping to accomplish

this. The question is what can universities do--the large white state universities I mean--to help develop black minds and help to mobolize them from cramped, designated recepticles of disuse? How can these universities force black minds into activity and help to insure their confidence in their credibility?

I think there is a way. Evidently one state university official thinks so too. Listen to the sentiment expressed by LSU's Chancellor Cecil Taylor in addressing the faculty council, March 1, 1973. He said "Universities have broad responsibilities. . . . Universities usually lag in some degree in responding to society, its problems, and its needs. They do not always readily identify and tackle the social problems of most pressing importance. For instance, few of us probably would hesitate to assert that there is no more pressing, no more serious social problem demanding attention and action today than that of minorities, particularly blacks, and better opportunities for them."

He further said: "None of us is unaware of the difficulty of the problem; all of us know that even small answers or partial solutions are hard to come by. Still, we, as a university, cannot in good conscience and with a sound sense of duty disregard the problem or fail to tackle it with vigor--with more vigor than we have to date. It is the responsibility of all of us."

The idea that I am trying to put across here is that Black theatre workers must be trained--educated is better--in the colleges and universities. Roles must obviously be given on an ability basis and less on a color or racial basis. Black theatre workers must be trained in the art of the profession wherever they choose to go to college. They must have a go at humanizing roles of universal quality, not just roles designed and recepticled specifically for blacks.

It is my feeling that it is the responsibility of the large state university theatres to help blacks achieve upward mobility in theatre with the same vigor as in athletics, marching bands and in other academic fields.

Black theatre has a potential and is deep into the reality of American blackness. But Black theatre is no island in itself. One immediate approach may be more black plays on the large white university campuses. But black actors shouldn't do only black plays, and every acting experience should not be a protest, an involvement with drugs, sexual deviations, debased family frustration, and with "superfly" or "shaft" fantasies. Black theatre is trying to tell us something.

It's just possible that that something is that the majority of black people are still in a prison, a kind of zoo. And black theatre workers, hidden away from the mainstream of universality, are likely to fall short of the mark. But blacks and whites will suffer if the responsibility for this is not shared.

My final idea is this. Black theatre is not only asking America and the world for respect and the dimension of human dignity, but it is demanding that blacks see, feel and emerge with self respect.